

## God's Joy – Nehemiah 8

**Introduction:** *Who was Nehemiah, how does his story fit into the larger story of the Bible? Let me pick up the Biblical story from the time of the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Jeremiah had prophesied from Jerusalem that God was going to judge His own people because they had followed after other gods, practiced great injustice/violence, and simply ignored God's law altogether. Jeremiah said that this would happen through Nebuchadnezzar, the King of Babylon, who would kill many and take many captive to Babylon. Ezekiel was a part of the first group of Jews taken to Babylon. Ezekiel became God's mouthpiece among those in Babylon. Ezekiel explained that God would have gladly withheld judgment (Ez. 18:23) if He could have simply found someone to intercede for Jerusalem (Ez. 22:30). God also told Ezekiel that he would be comforted (nacham) when he sees the redemptive result of God's judgment toward His own people (Ez. 14:23).*

*As the Jews are in Babylon God does find people who will pray for the nation of Judah, such as Daniel. There are a lot of stories and visions in Daniel, but the main message of the book is that Daniel interceded for his people to experience true repentance and restoration, and God then meets Daniel with a prophetic word concerning his nation of Israel (Judah). While in Babylon the Jewish people do experience deep repentance in a large part due to Jeremiah's message and the faithfulness and intercession of Daniel and others like him.*

*Not only did the Jews experience repentance, but they also then were returned to Jerusalem, not all at once, nor did the restoration of Jerusalem happen all at once. The rebuilding of Jerusalem took many years yet. Even after the temple was rebuilt the walls and gates remained in shambles.*

*This is where the story of Nehemiah comes in. Nehemiah was the cup bearer for the current King of Persia (Persia had conquered Babylon). When Nehemiah heard of the state that Jerusalem was in he was grieved and went into a deep place of prayer and fasting. The King of Persia saw his anguish and released and blessed Nehemiah with help to restore the walls and gates of Jerusalem. What took years and years ended up taking Nehemiah only 52 days!*

Jumping ahead to chapter 8 of Nehemiah-

Nehemiah is not satisfied with just restoring the physical walls; after having completed this task Nehemiah wishes to further restore the people's hearts back to the Lord. Nehemiah arranges with Ezra for a reading of the law. They assemble outdoors, as no building could hold such a large number of people. The reading of the law takes place from dawn to midday. The people's reaction is certainly of note as they all start weeping.

Why were they weeping? It is difficult to say for certain due to the lack of further explanation in scripture. One understanding would be that they were realizing afresh why God had judged the nation in the first place. Another understanding is based on the experience of many Christians historically and currently, whether famous revivals or youth camp meetings; it is that such great weeping is a result of being convicted of sin by God's law and Spirit. The Holy Spirit convicting us of our sin is needed and good, and we should weep for how we have sinned against God, but Nehemiah's response to the people is a game changer.

Nehemiah tells the people to stop weeping and start celebrating because, “the joy of the Lord is your strength”. That phrase has been used a lot, but it is interesting to see in this context. There are first a couple of questions I have about that phrase. Does God want us to force a fake smile when we are hurting? Is God apathetic toward our pain or sin? I certainly don’t believe that to be the case or what Nehemiah is saying to the people of Judah in this story.

Another important question is whether this joy primarily belonging to us or to God? Does our strength come from us being happy or from God being happy? Though understanding God as being joyful does typically translate into us being joyful as well. There are often difficult times in my life where I struggle to find joy, but several times in the midst of those situations God reveals to me the fact that He is joyful. This isn’t because He is unsympathetic; this is because He is declaring that He sees things from a different point of view and/or foresees a reason to have joy. This truly does give me strength and hope, rather than God callously demanding a smile from me. This of course is not a blanket promise over every situation. There are times in scripture where God declares with His foreknowledge that people are not going to repent, thus there of course is no reason for joy.

In this story of Nehemiah God is declaring that there is a reason to have joy, as God had already spoken to Ezekiel back during the exile (Ez. 14:23). They are weeping over their sin as they should, but God through Nehemiah was declaring that He was not finished with them and that there was a reason for them to have joy. God saw that He was going to produce faithfulness in them.

This story of Nehemiah is also an important reminder of the purpose of God’s law. Certainly one purpose is to convict us of sin, but the law does not exist because God desires to condemn us! In convincing us of our sinful state the law urges us to realize our deep need for God’s mercy (not giving us the punishment we deserve). Thus the law and Spirit’s conviction is not meant to push us away from God, but to show us how far away we are from God and thus inviting us to be reconciled to God.

God was not only offering mercy to the people of Judah; He was also offering grace (giving us blessings beyond what we deserve). God was declaring that He was going to produce faithfulness in them; He was going to give them the ability to once again be pleasing to Him, to give Him joy. God was declaring that the people of Judah were not doomed to repeat the failure of those who came before them. This came to be quite true as the people of Judah experienced a period of great devotion and faithfulness to the Lord.

As the people of Judah took Nehemiah’s words to heart, they celebrated what God was going to do for them and in them (just as Ezekiel had prophesied). The Lord had finally been comforted (*nacham*) by the repentance and faithfulness that was produced in the people of Judah, and that brings us to the meaning of Nehemiah’s name; *comforted is the Lord* (Nehem – *nacham*, iah- *Yah* (*the Lord*)).

While God’s law does convince us of our sin and depravity, God’s intent is not for us to left at that point. God is comforted when we repent of sin and return to Him. Our return to Him gives Him great joy, and it is His joy that gives us strength. His being joyful over us does translate to us finding great joy as well. Later on in the story of Nehemiah (chapter 12) the people assemble on the walls of Jerusalem. From there they praise God with such fervor and joy that neighboring towns could hear the resounding praise. God desires for us to have such joy, the joy of knowing that “He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus!” (Philippians 1:6)